

Cognitive Development, Individual Differences

A Look Inside: A Student Teacher's Dilemma

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Wednesday, September 7

Today was the first day of my student teaching assignment at Mountain Ridge Elementary school in Pamela Steiner's first grade classroom. Mountain Ridge is a somewhat small elementary school, with approximately 300 students. The school is located in a very rural setting and most of the teachers and faculty have been there for a considerable period of time, which gives the school a very close-knit feeling. Today was an exciting, nerve-wracking day for everyone . . . especially me! Even though I expected some confusion and lots of excitement on the part of both the teachers and students, there was more than I'd prepared myself for. The children arrived beginning at 8:00 a.m., put their things away, turned in their lunch money, and played until all of the students had arrived. The majority of the day was dedicated to learning routines, which were modeled by both the teacher and student examples, and getting acquainted with everyone through informal play and group activities. Throughout the day, I observed the students, their routines, abilities, and personal interactions, and I was impressed with their ability to adapt to new situations and learn new rules and routines. Despite the confusion and hectic setting of the first day of school, for the most part, this group of children promises to be very cooperative and easy to work with. I spoke to my clinical instructor after all of the children left this afternoon and she, too, promises to be wonderful to work with. She promotes an open classroom in which both the teachers and students learn new things every day. Much of the learning in her classroom is taught by modeling, and I feel very comfortable with this type of teaching. I feel that I got acquainted with the students

today, but look forward to getting to know them better in the next few weeks.

Friday, September 9

Every morning, the students are given 45 minutes of free time to allow for all of the students to arrive and get settled. I've been observing and interacting with the students during this time period, and I've gotten to know the majority of the students fairly well. For the most part, the students have settled into their classroom routines and groups of playmates, and it's very interesting to take note of the various play habits and attitudes. The students generally play with a set group of children and have naturally gravitated to their favorite activities. There are a few exceptions to this, however, and I'm very interested in the factors that contribute to these individual behaviors.

There are a few students who have demonstrated difficulty interacting with other children and teachers, including myself. I've tried to examine my own behavior to make sure I'm not the cause. I've tried to interact with these students on both a one-on-one level and in small groups of other students. I've found that some students work better in one setting versus the other and only need the gentle encouragement of a teacher to get them to interact willingly, while one student in particular, Aaron, doesn't appear to adapt well to any kind of setting. When I spoke with Pamela, my clinical instructor, she asked me to make specific observations about interesting behaviors and occurrences that I encounter, both inside and outside of the classroom, and this particular student has commanded a great deal of my attention. I think I'm going to continue to interact with Aaron in hopes of finding a way to get through to him—he's really a very sweet child, but has trouble interacting with other children his age.

Thursday, September 15

This past week, I paid particular attention to Aaron and his interactions with other students. I've noticed that he prefers to engage in activities that don't require other students' participation. While many of the other students engage in make-believe roleplaying games or play with toys that require more than one person, such as alphabet and number bingo, Aaron prefers to play with Legos, blocks, trucks, and the tool kit and wooden stump. Although these activities certainly could involve small groups of students, Aaron likes to have control and play alone. When he's approached by another student to share one of these activities, instead of telling him or her that he wants to play alone, Aaron begins to cry very loudly and waits for a teacher to intervene. This is very confusing to the other students because we have told them if they want to play with a toy that is being used by another student, all they have to do is ask politely if they can share. Although the student who was playing with the toy first has the right to share or not, generally the other students share, or at least provide a reason why they prefer to play alone, such as "I want to play with it now, but you can have it in a few minutes." Aaron, on the other hand, just begins to cry. The other students don't understand why Aaron reacts like this, and from what I can observe, his reaction hurts their feelings. I don't understand why Aaron reacts like this either, and for this reason, I'm having a very difficult time deciding how to interact and react to him. I tend to take things personally, whether they are intended to be personal or not, and I'm worried that this weakness will affect my ability to work with a child like Aaron.

Friday, September 16

I spoke with Pamela today after school regarding Aaron, in an attempt to get some background information. She told me that he's labeled DD (developmentally delayed) and

is emotionally about three and a half years old. As a result of this, he's not only emotionally immature, but also physically delayed. Although Pamela freely volunteered this information once I asked, it would have been valuable for me to be informed from day one. Now that I look back and think about it, Aaron's difficulties have become very obvious not only in his play habits in the classroom, but also on the playground.

While the other children run and play and participate in group activities that require some level of advanced physical coordination, Aaron prefers to play alone or with the younger children from the kindergarten class. Another reason that Aaron plays alone on the playground could also be that he has alienated many of the other students through his methods of interaction. I previously noticed that Aaron's tendency to cry instead of speaking confused the other children, and I honestly believe that they're beginning to exclude him from group activities, not because they don't like him, but because he doesn't know how to interact with them in an age-appropriate manner. I'm very worried about Aaron, but because I don't have any formal special education training, I'm not sure what my next step should be. Having the opportunity to speak with Pamela about Aaron's background helps explain some of his difficulties interacting with other children who are six years old both physically and emotionally. It will also help me to interact with Aaron in a more understanding and hopefully mutually beneficial manner, but I'm not sure that I will be able to do it myself. Pamela answered all of my questions; however, I feel like she was doing just that—answering questions. I'm very frustrated because I feel like she's not telling me all of the relevant information. I was under the impression that while we were teaching associates, we were to be "colleagues" with our clinical instructions, and I feel that I'm being treated like anything but equal in this situation.

Wednesday, September 21

Since speaking with Pamela regarding Aaron, I have continued to work with him in the mornings during free time, and we have actually become rather good "friends." He continues to play with the same toys (Legos, blocks, etc.), and although I "play with him," I'm really playing parallel to him. He doesn't allow me to interact with him while he's playing, and if I got up and walked away I don't think he would notice until another student approached him to share and he wanted me to "defend" him.

I've begun to play with Aaron on the playground also, and in this particular setting he seems to be concerned with having friends. He will say things to me like, "Are you my friend?" Aaron likes to play on the playground and, despite his delayed physical coordination, he's rather good at kicking a ball. He and I kick the ball back and forth, and occasionally another student will join in (much to my delight). However, Aaron quickly becomes uncomfortable with these other students and will either cry or not let these other students have their turn, and they quickly tire of this and leave. I don't understand this reaction to other students, especially when Aaron so desperately wants to have friends. The only explanation that I can find is that as a result of his delayed social skills, he does not yet understand that you can have many friends at a time. He regards me as his friend, and it appears to me that, in his eyes, other students threaten our friendship.

In addition to Aaron's lack of interaction, the issue of division of time has become a problem. Pamela generally is unconcerned with Aaron and prefers to interact with the rest of the class, saddling me with Aaron. I don't mind working with Aaron, mainly because if I didn't pay attention to him, no one would. On the other hand, I feel like I am being cheated out of interacting with the other students, and while I'm playing with Aaron, I'm simultaneously ignoring the other students. This isn't fair to either the other

students or me, and it is certainly not safe. I need to interact with the other students, but on the playground especially, I need to watch all of the students. Of course I'm Aaron's friend, but I'm concerned that he doesn't interact with other students or attempt to communicate his needs to them in a way that they can understand. His mother actually wrote a note saying that Aaron has mentioned me at home and that he's particularly fond of me. I'm very happy that I've been able to create this bond with Aaron and hope that this can be the basis for growth on both his part and mine. I'm going to continue to work with Aaron and attempt to draw other children into activities with us in hopes of sparking some sort of friendship amongst the group.

Friday, September 23

Despite my efforts, Aaron has become increasingly resistant to the classroom rules and routines and has exhibited progressively violent reactions to other students. When I first started working with Aaron, his typical reaction to an unacceptable situation was to cry and wait for someone else to intervene; however, recently he has turned to violence as a way to deal with these situations. Aaron occasionally will yell at or hit another student, and we've been dealing with this using time outs and verbal reprimands. Until today, he hadn't exhibited this type of behavior towards me, however, and I had continued to work with him as much as possible. I've attempted to maintain my "friendship" with Aaron, but today marked a very disturbing experience.

While I was working with Aaron during free time this morning, he suddenly began screaming in my face, for what seemed like no apparent reason. It was time to start cleaning up for morning group gathering, and when I asked him to finish what he was doing, he screamed "No!" right in my face. Although Aaron usually exhibits some mild

resistance to my directions, this request was no different than it had been for the past few weeks and I was baffled as to why he chose to react violently toward me. I couldn't get Aaron to calm down or stop screaming "NO!" over and over. Pamela had to intervene, although she doesn't usually involve herself in situations with Aaron. I didn't resent her intervention, but I felt helpless, like I had lost control of the situation. The other children were all suddenly aware of the situation, but didn't understand why Aaron was screaming at me, much in the same way that they didn't understand when he screamed at them. It was like I was frozen and couldn't do anything but watch—Aaron was screaming, the other children were staring, and I was just standing there, helpless, not doing anything. The situation was resolved when Pamela took Aaron out into the hall. I instinctively backed down, and for the rest of the day I was quite reserved, mainly because I was very upset.

When I got home this afternoon, I reflected on what had happened and could come up with absolutely no solutions. I just sat on my couch and cried. With all of my knowledge and experience, I couldn't handle the situation by myself, and I feel helpless. I tend to take things personally and I feel like today was an attack on me—even though I know it wasn't. I don't know what I'm going to do. I know that being a first grade teacher is tough, but I just keep asking myself, what would I have done if I was the real teacher, all alone in that classroom with one child screaming and twenty others watching? I'm trying very hard not to let this get to me, not to take it personally, but I'm beginning to develop a sort of self-pity, a "no one wants to help me" syndrome. I have the whole weekend to relax and think things over. I just have to decide, do I try to continue to help Aaron, or do I help *myself* by backing down and letting things run their course?

Monday, September 26

After a long weekend of reflection, I decided to speak to Pamela again. If she doesn't want to help, then there should be someone else who does. When I spoke to her about the incident with Aaron on Friday, she suggested that we meet with the resource teacher, Diane Rice. I'm a little anxious about working with Diane because I have very little experience with special education approaches; however, I'm interested in how Diane will approach such a volatile situation. In the meantime, Pamela has urged me to continue to interact with Aaron as much as possible, and she assured me that she would observe interactions and try to work with Aaron herself when I start teaching the entire class full time. After Friday's fiasco, I am very anxious and stressed about the thought of this type of thing happening over and over again. I barely managed to keep it together after it happened only once. What will happen to me if it doesn't stop and I just can't cope anymore?

Tuesday, September 27

Diane suggested that she begin by observing Aaron during one of these episodes, which won't be difficult since we have three or four of them a day in various degrees of seriousness. Although Aaron is DD, he is very aware of his surroundings and was clued in to the fact that Diane was in the room this morning. He has worked with her on previous occasions and Diane seems to think that she can work well with him. Well, the morning started much like many other, with the students arriving beginning at 8:00 a.m.. Aaron arrived and as usual I helped him put his things away and get out his lunch money. The students pay for their lunches in the morning, and since Aaron had forgotten to turn in his money on the way in from the bus, I asked for a volunteer to walk to the cafeteria with Aaron. There were many volunteers and I chose John, a very mature student, to go

with Aaron. It's little episodes like this one that keep me guessing. The other children generally shun Aaron on a regular basis, but when he needs help they're always more than willing to help him. Aaron seems pleased that the other children will help him, and that's why I don't think he's alienating them intentionally. He wants to be their friend, he just doesn't know how to interact and communicate so they can understand him. When Aaron and John returned, they settled into their morning routines, John at the sand table and Aaron playing by himself with some Legos and trucks. As Diane had requested, I interacted with Aaron in a usual manner, playing parallel to him, not with him.

Aaron has developed a particular sensitivity to two students in particular, George and Shane, and both of these students approached Aaron this morning at separate times. Both George and Shane tend to be slightly violent in confrontational situations, and when coupled with Aaron, a violent interaction usually occurs. The first to approach was George. George is very interested in the Titanic, and he wanted to use some of the Legos to build a model of the Titanic. George asked politely if he could use some of the Legos Aaron was playing with, and Aaron screamed "NO!" right in George's face. Having received no good reason for Aaron's denial, George attempted to *take* the Legos he needed and Aaron began screaming and shoving George. George began to push and shove in return and before we knew it we had a full-fledged fight on our hands. All of the other students had turned their attention to the episode at hand, and it took both Diane and me to calm things down. Both of the boys spent five minutes in time out (an automatic for hitting). After the time out, George abandoned his efforts to play with the Legos, and Aaron returned to his Legos and trucks. Just before it was time to clean up for morning group gathering, Shane approached Aaron about playing trucks with him. Aaron actually granted him permission, which was a miracle in itself, and the two began to drive

the trucks around on the carpet. When Shane accidentally ran over one of Aaron's Lego creations with his truck, Aaron flew into a rage of crying and hitting. Shane hit back to defend himself, and once again both boys spent five minutes in time out. When the five minutes were up, Diane helped Aaron clean up and sat with him during morning gathering, which made it easier for me to keep the other students on track and not let them be distracted by Aaron.

I must say that deep inside I'm pleased that Diane witnessed such telling incidents. I don't like to deal with a disruptive classroom; however, Pamela tends to minimize the incidents with Aaron, and it is nice to finally have someone "on my side." I was beginning to feel very isolated, and having Diane become involved has eased my mind a little in just one day.

Wednesday, September 28

I spoke to Diane this morning and she'll be getting back to me later this week with some suggestions for Aaron. In the meantime, I'm supposed to continue to work with Aaron and keep the violence and screaming to a minimum. Today Pamela was absent, and we had an after-school volunteer as a substitute. Basically, I was in charge all day. The substitute did very little. Today was *VERY* hectic and trying for many reasons. First of all there was a substitute, which produces some disruption in and of itself. Second, there was fire drill this morning, which went off without incident, but was disruptive none the less. Third, when we were coming in from recess, the children had lined up to get a drink of water in the hall, and while I was bent over tying Aaron's shoes, Shane pulled the fire alarm above the water fountain. The substitute was standing there, but I don't know what she was doing, because she certainly was not supervising the children. The entire school was evacuated again, and because it wasn't a scheduled fire drill, the

county sent fire trucks and police cars with sirens blaring. As a result of the evacuation, lunch was delayed and the rest of the day was totally useless. Shane was made to apologize to the fire department and his parents were called. Between devoting the majority of my time to Aaron and having to deal with Shane, I feel like I got very little accomplished today. I also feel very foolish. As I said before, I tend to take this type of thing personally, and even though it wasn't totally my fault, I feel like it reflects badly on me.

Today also brings to mind again the issue of division of attention and individualized time with students. With me spending so much time with Aaron, I'm not able to devote the correct amount of time to the other students. I can only say that tomorrow can't possibly be half as terrible as today. It would just be impossible for that to happen to the same person two days in a row. Despite this comforting thought, I'm already dreading going to school tomorrow. I have to face the other teachers, not to mention having to explain to Pamela what happened. I know the fire alarm incident was not my fault, but in situations like that everyone blames someone, and I seriously doubt that the substitute or Shane will be blamed for any of it. As I sit here writing this, I feel like I should be able to laugh about it. Everyone I told laughed, but somehow this isn't funny to me; it's just something else to deal with.

Thursday, September 29

Today, Pamela was back at school. She asked me how things went yesterday and I told her. She wasn't as upset as I had predicted. In fact she thought it was kind of funny, just like everyone else I told. I guess in an elementary school these kinds of things just happen sometimes. My roommate told me that I just need to develop a "tough skin" about stuff like this. I guess she's right, but it's still very hard for me to let things like this roll

off my back, even though no one is directly blaming me.

Pamela and I met with Diane Rice during our planning time this morning. From observing Aaron, Diane has determined that Aaron's difficulties—following directions, obeying authority, and interacting with others—stem from a "power struggle" issue. Because he's developmentally delayed, he has not yet reached the maturity level of the other students in the class and has a difficult time recognizing and obeying authority. Diane said that if you observed a pre-school classroom, you would see many incidents of behavior similar to Aaron's. At that age this behavior is considered "age appropriate"; however, at Aaron's age it is not considered appropriate. Diane suggested a system of alternatives to be used with Aaron to try to avoid such power struggles. For example, instead of telling Aaron it's time to clean up from free time and get ready to eat a snack, we should warn him five minutes before it's time and when the time comes, we should say, "Aaron, the other children are cleaning up for snack time now. You can either clean up now or you may sit quietly but you must stop playing with your toys." Theoretically, allowing Aaron to make the final decision removes the authority from me and allows him to have the "power" to make his own decisions. If this works correctly, Aaron will opt to clean up (at least most of the time) not because he thinks that's what I want, but because he's the one making decisions, and cleaning up is better than sitting and watching the other students eat their snacks.

Diane also suggested that we use non-verbal reprimands with Aaron. One such system that's used with other developmentally delayed children is the "finger system." For each infraction, the teacher holds up a number of fingers, and once you reach the maximum amount you are removed from the group. This system works mainly because it gives children the power to make their own decisions. Children don't want to be

excluded, and being removed from the group is the ultimate punishment. For example, if Aaron was disrupting the group during a story, every time he had to be corrected, instead of the teacher speaking to him (and disrupting the group), she would hold up one finger for the first correction, two fingers for the second and three fingers (the maximum) for the third. At this point, Aaron would be removed from the group.

Diane suggests this system for three reasons. One, we can correct Aaron without disrupting the rest of the class; two, this will prevent drawing the other students' attention to Aaron and will hopefully cut down on his alienation and difficulty making friends; and three, this type of discipline allows Aaron to make the decisions as to whether he will be allowed to remain in the group, which fits with the avoiding-power-struggles technique recommended by Diane.

Friday, September 30

We've tried these new approaches suggested by Diane for the past few days and, although I honestly think they are working, it's a hit-or-miss situation. Some days Aaron has an absolutely terrific day, and others he's violent and loud all day long. This inconsistency in Aaron's behavior got me thinking, and it's like there are factors other than school that play a part in Aaron's behavior at school. I've been thinking about the external factors that could be affecting Aaron's behavior, and I decided to ask Diane about it today after school. Diane didn't know a lot of specifics about Aaron's home life, but she intimated that she thought many of his problems started there. She recommended that I speak to the guidance counselor and when I did, I found out that Aaron's mother is an alcoholic and that his father is the primary caregiver at home. The mother is also prone to disappearing for days at a time. Aaron's father is out of town occasionally for business, and when Aaron is at home alone with his mother, he's somewhat neglected. I had

noticed that for one entire week, the week that Aaron's mother wrote that nice note, Aaron brought the same four cookies to school for snack. Every day he would say he didn't like them, wouldn't eat them, and would take them home. The next day they were right back in his lunch box. I didn't think much of it at the time, but this incident is very telling of the kind of care that his mother provides.

I'm glad that I found out this information, but it does make it hard to treat Aaron like the other children, because in a way I feel sorry for him. It also makes me feel more helpless than I did before, because I can't do anything about Aaron's home life. Just when I think this problem is under control, something happens and all of the sudden I feel out of control again. It's very difficult emotionally to be in a position where you are expected to be in charge and in control, yet at the same time you have to justify your actions to so many people. It's kind of like a "rock and a hard place" situation.

Wednesday, October 5

Today we decided to remove the tool kit and wooden stump from the classroom. Aaron didn't have a good day today, and he tried to hit Shane with the hammer from the tool kit. Luckily, Shane was rather quick and Aaron's aim is not all that accurate, so the situation turned out much better than it might have. When things like this happen, I guess it's easy to gloss over them and think things turned out fine because no one got hurt. Now that the tools are gone, it can't possibly happen again, but now that I think about it, I can't believe Pamela didn't make a bigger deal out of the incident. I can't imagine how a teacher would have explained to a parent how their child got injured seriously when another student hit him with a hammer. I know it wouldn't be my fault per se if this did happen, but it still would be a reflection on my ability to manage a classroom, and I'm sure that somehow I would find a way to take it personally. When I decided to become a

teacher, I didn't think I'd be dealing with hammer-wielding first graders. I wanted to be challenged, not pushed to my limits.

Thursday, October 6

Today we had three parent volunteers in the classroom for most of the afternoon. I was tense and nervous and praying there would be not incidents of violence or screaming, but of course I wasn't that lucky. Although Aaron isn't my sole responsibility, I feel like I'm blamed every time there's a disruption or an incident of violence. I feel like this reflects not only on my ability to work with Aaron, but also on my ability to be a good teacher in general. I've learned to have eyes in the back of my head and not to take those eyes off of Aaron if at all possible, but with all of the commotion and people in the room, my attention was divided among many things at once.

I had stepped away from working with Aaron to refill the paint cans at the easel, and as soon as I did, I heard the block castle that a group of students had built earlier come crashing down. Before I even looked, I knew Aaron was somehow involved. I tried to remedy the situation as quickly as possible. All I remember thinking was how mortified I'd be if the parents had to witness any fighting or screaming, but Aaron and George and Shane had already begun to hit and scream. Pamela came to help also, but by this time all of the students and parents were watching. Somehow in all of the commotion, Aaron got hold of a pencil and stabbed Shane in the left cheek. George and Shane tend to have hot tempers, so calming them down was not easy and now that Shane was bleeding and crying hysterically, it wasn't getting any easier. Shane was taken to the clinic, and the nurse decided he didn't need further medical attention. Pamela simply wrote a note home explaining the huge band-aid on Shane's cheek. I can't believe she

glossed over yet *another* serious incident, but I'm more surprised that there isn't an established school policy to be followed when a child is injured at school, or if there is one, why Pamela didn't follow it. The nurse and Pamela glossed over the incident, I knew that we, the teachers, would not hear the end of this any time soon.

Tomorrow is my last day as the full-time classroom teacher. I am going to spend the majority of the last week of my placement observing other classrooms, and inside I'm so relieved I can hardly put it in words. Every night when I get home and every morning before I leave for school my thoughts are filled with anxiety, frustration and self-blame, but not after this week. In a way, I feel selfish feeling so relieved, selfish because after I leave, no one will be there to help Aaron, but in another way, I feel nothing but relief. I didn't deserve what happened to me, and I'm glad that it will all be over very soon.

Friday, October 7

One of the parents that was in the room yesterday apparently reported the incident to Suzanne Taylor, the principal. Although, to my knowledge, Suzanne hadn't been told anything about the incident (which amazes me), she assured the concerned parent that Aaron received special attention from the resource teacher and that there would be no further incidents. I don't know if the parent believed her, but I certainly do not. I know that what happened yesterday isn't a reflection on me personally, but somehow I still feel like it is. I also know that yesterday will not be the last time Aaron acts out violently. Despite this, deep inside, I am relieved that I am no longer burdened with Aaron.

Questions:

1. How would you describe Aaron's cognitive development? Describe any of Piaget's or Vygotsky's stages or zones that fit for Aaron?

2. Do you relate to the student teacher's difficulty in understanding Aaron? In what ways, if any, do you think she could have tried harder to understand Aaron and/or to help the other students understand him?
3. How much information should a classroom teacher share with her student teacher in regard to special needs students? Should the student teacher have had to ask her clinical instructor for such information, or should she have been provided with it from the beginning? What differences do you see arising in the classroom as a result of these two possible situations?
4. In what way(s) do you think this student teacher's tendency to take things personally will affect her teaching ability, interactions with the students, and interactions with the other teachers?
5. How could this student teacher have dealt with her lack of special education background and training? Should she have been placed in this particular inclusive classroom situation without any special education training? Why or why not?
6. In your opinion, what should the characteristics of an ideal clinical instructor/student teacher relationship be for the maximum benefit to both parties? Please comment on the rights and responsibilities of both parties.
7. Should the student teacher allow herself to concentrate on Aaron? Is she ignoring the needs of the other students in doing so? What could be the drawbacks of denying herself the experience of interacting with the other students?
8. After reading about how the student teacher reacted to the initial screaming incident, how do you think you would have reacted? Differently? Similarly? Why?
9. When considering Diane Rice's suggestions, do you think that she correctly analyzed the situation? What would you do differently, if anything?
10. In the last two entries of her journal, the student teacher talks about her relief and her guilt about wanting to leave. Did you perceive her thoughts as selfish the way that she did, or do you think she was justified in her feelings?